

Opera Hot

The Met's fall season.

By [Alex Ross](#) December 18, 2005

Joseph Volpe, whose sixteen-year tenure as the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera ends this season, may be remembered as a man who stayed true to his title: he managed. Performances went off with maximum efficiency, seven each week. World-class singers showed up in mostly suitable roles, and if they misbehaved they were shown the door, or at least treated brusquely. James Levine was kept happy. Electronic subtitles appeared on the backs of the seats. Modest efforts were made in the direction of fresh production styles, novel repertory, and premières—Tobias Picker's "An American Tragedy" bowed this month—but not enough to ruffle anyone's feather boa. Through various crises—a singer dying onstage, a bloated superstar cancelling, attendance figures falling in the wake of September 11th, a Cuban billionaire patron turning out to be neither a billionaire nor a Cuban—Volpe kept the great old house trundling along. Was he a visionary? No. Did rival American companies—particularly the San Francisco Opera, with its history-making productions of Messiaen's "Saint Francis" and John Adams's "Doctor Atomic"—challenge the Met's preëminence? Yes. But the chaos that has surrounded many big houses elsewhere has been absent from the Met, and in this business the absence of chaos is a considerable achievement.

The fall season showed off the familiar virtues and flaws of the Volpe era. Casting remains the company's glory; a "Così Fan Tutte" with Matthew Polenzani, Mariusz Kwiecien, Barbara Frittoli, Magdalena Kožená, and Thomas Allen was a model Mozart performance, and James Levine made it shine. A revival of "Ariadne auf Naxos" gave witness to Violeta Urmana's majestic ascent from mezzo-soprano to dramatic soprano roles. The young Italian tenor Giuseppe Filianoti made a dashing début as Edgardo in "Lucia di

Lammermoor," and acquired a fan club in the upper balconies by the fifth performance. An old-school, from-the-heart singer in the mode of Giuseppe di Stefano, Filianoti plucked off high notes with a clear, pinging tone, maintained a generous long line, and threw himself into the role with infectious, almost loony enthusiasm. On the ho-hum side, a new staging of Gounod's "Roméo et Juliette," set in a sort of Renaissance astronomer's fantasy world, was beautiful to look at but dramatically inert. If the creative team had any strong ideas, they seem to have been squelched sometime during the rehearsal process.

Peter Gelb, the former head of the Sony Classical label, takes over from Volpe next fall. Expect more chic, more flair, more vaguely radical gestures at the Met. The one-man army of Peter Sellars will finally invade the house. The film director Anthony Minghella is scheduled to bring his production of "Madama Butterfly" from London. Singers will probably be younger, slimmer, more photogenic; Gelb reportedly plans to lean on Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón, two singers with a certain movie-star quality. (Internet wits call them "opera hot," which means that they are explosively sexy in comparison with the usual.) Such moves may produce short-term gains in attendance, though the long-term health of the company cannot be guaranteed by glitz alone. Ideally, Gelb will think past the marketing level and grapple with what it means to put on opera in the twenty-first century.

Netrebko and Villazón recently sang together in a revival of "Rigoletto," providing a preview of the Gelb regime. (They will be back in January and February.) Of the two, Netrebko is the one obviously put on earth to sing at the Met. Her voice is preternaturally lovely, glowingly audible even at the softest dynamic levels, rich-toned from top to bottom. She spins lusciously long phrases, although she tends to lose control of pitch in rapid runs. She is obviously determined to be something other than a lyric ornament, as her slow, haunting "Caro nome" and willowy poses made clear. Villazón is equally riveting, in a different way. He doesn't have the biggest voice in the tenor business (Filianoti's rings out better), but he works overtime to make his

presence felt, partly through pinpoint musicianship and partly through vehement expression. His Duke came off as a demented young narcissist, yet was dangerously appealing all the same. What's worrying is that he sometimes pushed his voice to a shout when orchestra and chorus kicked in behind him. Both Villazón and Netrebko face rocky futures if they stretch their voices too far, but the Met won't be a dull place with them around.

Between 1950 and 1990, the Met presented a grand total of three world premières. Volpe and Levine have made partial amends for that wretched record by bringing forth four new operas in the past fifteen years, with Tan Dun's "The First Emperor" on deck for next season. Unfortunately, premières are still so infrequent that crushing expectations attend them, and disappointment inevitably ensues when a new work fails to astound Diaghilev out of his grave. Picker's "An American Tragedy," which had its first performance on December 2nd and plays through December 28th, has had a predictably mixed reception. Opera fans have acclaimed its solid construction and singable lines; critics, by and large, have scoffed. After two viewings, I find myself siding with the fans. The opera is a fitfully inspired creation, wavering along the fine line between tragedy and turgidity, but, on a primal, Pucciniesque level, it hits the mark.

The story comes from Theodore Dreiser's novel, which also inspired the 1951 film "A Place in the Sun," with Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor. A poor, handsome, lethally ambitious young man named Clyde Griffiths shacks up with an employee at his uncle's factory, only to cast her aside in favor of a wealthy socialite named Sondra Finchley. When Roberta, his first lover, is found drowned in a lake, Clyde is sent to the electric chair, although he seems guilty more of contemplating murder than of committing it. Gene Scheer, the librettist, sleekly condenses Dreiser's eight hundred and fifty pages, and he could have cut a little more. The first act lacks dramatic situations, and only in the second do we get to the raw meat: Roberta, pregnant and enraged, confronting Clyde in church; the death in the lake; the trial; the walk to the chair. Funny how this Gilded Age melodrama, in

which obscene wealth warps the morals of all, anti-abortion laws drive young people to desperation, and capital punishment is handed down without clear physical evidence, is not quite as dated as it should be.

Picker works largely within the lingua franca that has defined mainstream American opera since Gian Carlo Menotti found a popular audience for the form after the Second World War, with "The Medium" and "The Consul." There are vernacular songs and religious hymns to establish the all-American scene, lush verismo textures for the lovemaking, suave Gershwin-esque tunes to convey the upper classes at play, distorted genre pieces à la Shostakovich and Britten for public confrontations, and, at moments of maximum fright, bursts of Berg. There's also much that's individual; Picker's harmony flirts with traditional tonality without falling prey to cliché, his orchestration achieves both transparency and power, and his crowd scenes skillfully set solo voices against a booming chorus and a churning orchestra. It's a pleasure to listen to him put one idea in front of another; a twelve-tone composer in his youth, he retains the serialist's habit of working obsessively with a tight array of notes.

Admittedly, Picker's writing here is not as tight as in "Emmeline," the crisply lurid 1996 opera that established his theatrical reputation. The vocal lines flow, but the prosody is odd; long stretches of text are shoehorned into a set melodic pattern, whether or not the pattern fits. ("Bring-it-to-the-*chuuurch*" sounds right; "I'll-meet-you-to-*niiiight*" sounds awkward.) Also, there are too many recurring tics, such as the ominous appoggiatura—C sounding over B-flat minor—with which the opera begins. A similar token of doom appears at the beginning of "Emmeline," and it seems to put a heavy guilt frame around the action instead of drawing us in. Yet notice how Picker resolves this chord in the final scene: once Clyde confesses that he could have saved Roberta, fraught B-flat minor gives way to a simpler, starker A minor, on which the opera ends. The score is full of such careful touches; melodrama aside, it's a serious, substantial piece.

The cast was almost excessively fine. Nathan Gunn sang the role of Clyde, and he had the right quotient of male glamour for a performer in competition with the tragically beautiful Monty Clift. His burnished baritone combines the easily separable virtues of smooth legato and crisp diction, and his burnished body wouldn't look out of place in an Abercrombie & Fitch ad. But he lacked loudness, and, by extension, menace; you couldn't think the worst of him. It didn't help that Scheer and Picker gave him a weak aria in which toxic ambition was expressed as a love of motorcars. Susan Graham swanned grandly through the Sondra Finchley role, adding a sardonic edge to her plush mezzo timbre. Patricia Racette gave dramatic fire to Roberta. Richard Bernstein, as the D.A., showed off a dark, commanding bass-baritone. Dolora Zajick thundered righteously in the role of Clyde's mother, her deepest tones putting the fear of God into decadent Manhattan.

James Conlon conducted with self-effacing panache, and, reportedly, helped fix problematic patches of the score during the rehearsals. Francesca Zambello provided psychologically acute direction; her work with Clyde's wealthy relations, who were played by Jennifer Larmore, Kim Begley, William Burden, and Jennifer Aylmer, brought out much funny, telling social detail. Handsome, austere stage pictures were provided by Adrienne Lobel, the set designer; Dunya Ramicova, the costume designer; and James Ingalls, the lighting designer, all of whom work regularly with Peter Sellars. The action took place on multiple levels, and photographic collages evoked the upstate New York setting without lapsing into the picturesque. As he has so often, Ingalls provided the decisive touch: in the drowning scene, a bright light somehow made everything dark. ◆